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AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR OVERSEAS AID

(INCORPORATED IN THE ACT)

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From: Pat Walsh

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Regarding proposed Bendigo-Baucau sister city relationship

An interesting twist to the East Timor story has come to my attention recently which I thought you should know about.

1. A group of businessmen in Bendigo, Victoria, have proposed that the Bendigo City Council establish a sister city arrangement with Baucau in East Timor.

2. The proponents are the Mayor of Bendigo, James Douglas, and two local solicitors Doug Cahill (a tough customer, by all accounts) and Dick Sandner. All three reportedly have interests in tourism and mining and visited Baucau in the latter part of last year.

3. The proposal has not yet gone to Council, but is claimed to have DFAT backing.

4. The proponents have discussed the proposal with the Bendigo Indonesian Club which comprises, inter alia, some alert teachers and others familiar with East Timor. They are opposing the plan arguing that, in view of the continuing conflict and suffering in East Timor, arrangements like this are both inappropriate and can only be interpreted in Indonesia's favour. Further if, as they suspect, the arrangment is to facilitate business, this would only benefit Indonesian and elitist interests and not the people generally. Other avenues could be explored if the purpose were to assist the people.
   The proponents also suggested that an exchange program for East Timorese and Bendigo students could be organised under the scheme. The teachers said they did not believe this was workable because of the political and security situation in East Timor and they did not want to be party to a window dressing exercise to prepare the ground for a profit making venture.

5. The Bendigo Indonesian Club believe they have made their point and can do nothing further. Nor do they want to jeopardise their organisation or involvement with Indonesia. (Bendigo is the largest Indonesian studies centre in Victoria outside Melbourne. Indonesian is taught at Bendigo High, Golden Square High, Flora Hill High, St Mary's College, the CAE and probably also at Girton College.) They suggested Bendigo should look at a relationship with Malang in East Java.

6. During a recent visit to Baucau (July) a friend was told that an Australian planned to build a tourist hotel on the beach there.

7. During a visit to East Timor in September last year, about the time of the Bendigo visit, a friend met an Australian business mission in Dili. She commented as follows:

'One afternoon a group of six businessmen from Melbourne arrived (at the Hotel Turismo where she was staying), all hush-hush, led by Paul Swarz (ex-army training school Bandung) ready to inspect the beaches of Dili for potential tourist development. They had their eyes in particular on the lovely white sands of Dili's most famous beach -areia branca - where they were going to buy the land to set up an enormous hotel complex. Australian investment, elegant looking Chinese businessmen from Surabaya conducting the negotiations regarding Timorese land... The ones you never say were the Timorese people handling their own affairs, being involved in business or determining their own future and prosperity. The restaurants along Santana (Santa Anna) carry names like Coto Makassar, Warung Malang, Rumah Makan Wirma and are entirely owned by Bugis, Javanese, Makassans or Chinese from Surabaya... This question of marginalisation of the native people of East Timor in their own country cannot be emphasised enough and needs to be brought to public attention'.

This sort of observation is commonly made by visitors. This marginalisation also extends to the bureaucracy. A recent Indonesian academic study concluded that 'local government is overwhelmingly non-East Timorese'.

Ends